Perceptions of Social and Religious Studies Teachers on Using English as the Medium of Instruction in Rwandan Lower Primary Schools

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Abstract

This study explored the perceptions of Social and Religious Studies teachers regarding the use of English as the medium of instruction (EMI) in Rwandan lower primary schools. Specifically, it aimed to identify the perceived instructional benefits of EMI, evaluate the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies used in EMI settings, and examine the challenges associated with its implementation. The study adopted a qualitative research approach and was guided by the constructivist paradigm. Nineteen teachers from Primary One to Primary Three were purposively selected. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicated that EMI contributed to improved English language proficiency among both teachers and learners, promoted early-grade learning outcomes, and encouraged the use of digital tools and research-based instructional practices. However, the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies was influenced by teachers' English fluency and the availability of instructional materials. Key challenges identified included limited English proficiency, insufficient teacher training, scarcity of teaching and learning resources, low parental involvement, and increased teacher workload. The study concludes that while EMI demonstrates several perceived instructional benefits, its success in lower primary education depends on strengthening teacher capacity, enhancing resource availability, and adopting supportive language strategies. It recommends targeted professional development, a review of the early-grade language policy, and initiatives to increase parental engagement to improve the implementation of EMI in Rwandan primary schools.

Keywords: *Perception, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), Social and Religious*

1. Introduction

The use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has attracted increasing global attention due to its impact on classroom communication and student achievement. EMI refers to teaching school subjects in English in contexts where most learners are not native speakers (Macaro et al., 2021).

In Rwanda, the case of Social and Religious Studies (SRS) is particularly significant. At the primary level, SRS integrates societal structures, historical contexts, cultural values, and religious beliefs (MINEDUC, 2015). Unlike mathematics or science, the subject relies heavily on language to convey abstract concepts, moral reasoning, and culturally embedded narratives. This makes it especially sensitive to language policy shifts. When EMI is applied, both teachers and learners face added challenges in expressing and interpreting complex social, cultural, and ethical ideas in a non-native language.

Although EMI has been promoted internationally for its potential to improve English proficiency and global competitiveness (Canagarajah, 2018; Galloway & Rose, 2021), research shows that students in non-English-speaking contexts often struggle with comprehension, participation, and cognitive load (Sah & Li, 2018; Costley et al., 2021). These difficulties are intensified when teachers also lack strong English skills or adequate pedagogical support (Macaro, 2018).

In Rwanda, the language-in-education policy has shifted dramatically—from French and Kinyarwanda in earlier decades to English since 2008, and most recently, to English as the medium of instruction from the first year of primary education (Sibomana, 2020; Makonye & Mudhumo, 2023). These rapid changes present particular challenges for rural schools where English exposure is limited, learning resources are scarce, and teachers face difficulties adapting to EMI.

Against this background, this study focuses on teacher perceptions of EMI in the teaching of SRS in lower primary schools in Nyamagabe District. This district is particularly relevant because its rural setting amplifies challenges such as low English proficiency and limited access to instructional materials (Ingabire et al., 2024). The study investigates (i) how teachers perceive the use of EMI in SRS, (ii) the instructional strategies they employ, and (iii) the challenges they encounter.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by three interrelated perspectives: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Bandura's Social Learning Theory, and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Each offers a different lens for understanding how teachers implement English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in *Social and Religious Studies (SRS)*, a subject that relies heavily on language to convey cultural values, ethical reasoning, and religious ideas.

2.1.1 Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction, scaffolding, and cultural tools. In the context of SRS, values such as respect, empathy, and cooperation are not learned in isolation but through dialogue with teachers and peers. When EMI is used, this dialogue becomes more challenging because abstract moral and cultural concepts must be expressed in a second language. Vygotsky's theory helps explain why strategies such as scaffolding through translation, code-switching, or using culturally familiar examples are essential for helping learners connect English expressions with deeply rooted cultural and religious values. Thus, the theory directly illuminates how language and culture intersect in SRS classrooms.

2.1.2 Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Bandura (1977) highlights learning through observation, imitation, and modelling. In SRS, teachers model moral reasoning, respectful discourse, and religious practices. Learners often imitate teachers' language use and value expressions, which makes the teacher's proficiency in English crucial. Bandura's theory also extends to teacher learning: SRS teachers often adopt EMI strategies by observing colleagues or attending professional workshops. However, when resources are scarce or teachers lack confidence in English, imitation alone is insufficient, which explains uneven implementation of EMI in SRS classrooms.

2.1.3 Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

Ajzen (1991) argues that behaviour is shaped by attitudes, social norms, and perceived control. Applied to SRS, TPB explains why some teachers embrace EMI while others remain hesitant. Teachers who believe that EMI improves students' global opportunities (positive attitude), who feel supported by colleagues and school leaders (subjective norms), and who feel capable of explaining complex values in English (perceived control) are more likely to integrate EMI effectively. Conversely, if teachers fear misrepresenting sensitive religious or cultural content due to limited English, they may resist or modify EMI use. This shows how motivation and perceived competence influence how values-based education is delivered through English.

Taken together, these theories explain different dimensions of EMI in SRS. Vygotsky shows the need for scaffolding in teaching values through a second language, Bandura underscores the role of modelling in transmitting both language and values, and TPB highlights the motivational and attitudinal factors that shape teachers' willingness to adopt EMI. This multidimensional framework is therefore well-suited for analyzing the benefits, pedagogical practices, and challenges of EMI in teaching SRS in Rwandan lower primary schools.

2.2 Empirical review

2.2.1 Curriculum Context of Social and Religious Studies in Rwanda

In Rwanda, Social and Religious Studies (SRS) in lower primary schools aims to cultivate

social responsibility, spirituality, and peaceful coexistence (REB, 2020; MINEDUC, 2015). EMI has been positioned as both a language-learning tool and a means of delivering moral and civic education. Empirical work in Rwanda (Uwitonze et al., 2022; Niyonzima & Umulisa, 2023) highlights the subject's role in promoting moral reasoning and citizenship. However, these studies are largely qualitative and small-scale, making it difficult to generalize findings to the national context. They also focus more on content outcomes (e.g., values formation) than on how EMI affects comprehension and participation, leaving a significant research gap.

2.2.2 Benefits of EMI in Lower Primary Education

Early Language Acquisition. In Rwanda, EMI is believed to improve learners' long-term English proficiency (Sibomana, 2020). Local studies confirm that children exposed to EMI at an early age develop stronger listening skills but often struggle with writing and abstract reasoning (Tabaro & Twahirwa, 2018). This suggests uneven benefits compared to the more optimistic findings from Vietnam and China (Nguyen & Hamid, 2021; Hu & McKay, 2012), where resources and teacher training were more robust.

Global Competency and Access to Knowledge. Advocates argue that EMI equips Rwandan learners for global engagement. Yet empirical work by Makonye & Mudhumo (2023) shows that in rural schools, limited access to digital tools and reference materials undermines this potential. Unlike OECD contexts where EMI correlates with digital literacy (OECD, 2018), in Rwanda the absence of such infrastructure weakens the argument that EMI automatically prepares learners for global citizenship.

Academic Advancement. Cummins' (1981) theory has been used to justify early EMI in Rwanda, but Nizeyimana & Ndayambaje (2019) show that weak foundations in Kinyarwanda literacy often carry over into English learning. This suggests that academic advantages claimed in international research (e.g., Zhou & Qin, 2020) may not materialize without stronger bilingual support.

Collaborative Learning. Rwandan studies (Mugabo et al., 2024) indicate that EMI can reduce rather than enhance peer collaboration, especially when learners fear making mistakes in English. This contrasts with findings from European contexts (Toth, 2018; Tang, 2020), highlighting the importance of sociolinguistic context in shaping outcomes.

2.2.3 Pedagogical Strategies Supporting EMI

Rwanda-specific studies show mixed results with strategies such as translation, code-switching, and scaffolding. For instance, Tabaro & Nyirandegeya (2017) found that translation helps in comprehension but limits immersion, echoing international concerns (Swain, 1985). Similarly, inconsistent code-switching in Rwanda has been linked to confusion and lesson delays (Probyn, 2019). Yet very few empirical studies in Rwanda compare these strategies systematically or test their long-term effects, leaving a methodological gap.

Professional development has been repeatedly identified as a missing link (Uwitonze et al.,

2022; Ingabire et al., 2024). Most existing studies rely on self-reports from teachers, which may overestimate the extent of strategy use. Observational or experimental studies remain scarce in Rwanda, limiting the robustness of current evidence.

2.2.4 Challenges of EMI in Lower Primary Education

Student-related challenges. Empirical studies in Rwanda (Nizeyimana & Ndayambaje, 2019; Mugabo et al., 2024) report low comprehension, fear of participation, and high dropout risks when EMI is poorly supported. However, many of these studies are conducted in single districts and rely heavily on qualitative interviews, which may not capture broader patterns.

Teacher-related challenges. Rwandan teachers face limited English proficiency and inadequate training (Tabaro & Twahirwa, 2018). While international studies emphasize professional development as a solution (Nguyen & Pham, 2020), Rwandan research indicates that one-off workshops do not provide sufficient support for ongoing classroom practice.

Systemic challenges. Tabaro & Nyirandegeya (2017) highlight the scarcity of age-appropriate EMI teaching materials in Rwanda, a gap rarely discussed in Asian or European contexts where resources are more abundant. Furthermore, studies often fail to disaggregate findings by rural and urban schools, leaving questions about equity and policy implementation unanswered.

The reviewed literature confirms both opportunities and challenges of EMI in lower primary education, but Rwanda-specific evidence remains limited and methodologically uneven. Many studies rely on small samples, qualitative designs, or self-reported teacher data. Findings from Asia and Europe cannot be uncritically generalized because Rwanda faces unique constraints—such as resource shortages, rural-urban disparities, and the value-laden nature of SRS. This study therefore addresses these gaps by focusing empirically on how teachers in Nyamagabe District perceive and implement EMI in the teaching of Social and Religious Studies.

3. Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted to explore in-depth, context-specific experiences. This enabled the collection of rich, descriptive data through interviews and classroom observations, capturing teachers' perceptions, challenges, and strategies related to EMI in the teaching of Social and Religious Studies (SRS). The study was guided by a constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes co-construction of meaning between the researcher and participants. Semi-structured interviews and observations facilitated a flexible, interactive process that respected participants' lived realities.

An intrinsic qualitative case study design was employed. This choice was made because the research interest lies not in generalizing beyond Mugano Sector or in comparing multiple cases, but in understanding the unique realities of this single context. Mugano was chosen because it is a rural area where EMI implementation coincides with distinct challenges—limited resources, low English exposure, and the value-laden nature of SRS. Unlike an

instrumental case study, which uses the case to shed light on broader issues, or a *collective case study*, which compares multiple sites, this study is *intrinsic* because Mugano itself is of particular interest and value.

The study was conducted in Mugano Sector, targeting all 19 SRS teachers from 9 public lower primary schools. These teachers had taught P1–P3 using EMI between 2021 and 2024, corresponding to the CBC policy shift. A census method was applied due to the small and well-defined population. All 19 eligible teachers were included, ensuring maximum variation while also achieving data saturation.

Two tools were used: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The interview guide addressed teachers' perceptions of EMI benefits, pedagogical strategies, and challenges. The observation checklist focused on language practices, teaching methods, student engagement, and material use. Data were collected in Kinyarwanda, transcribed, and translated into English.

To ensure **trustworthiness** (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

- **Credibility** was enhanced through triangulation of interviews and observations, and by conducting member checks with participants.

- **Dependability** was addressed by keeping detailed documentation of research procedures.

- **Confirmability** was supported through reflexive journaling, which helped monitor potential researcher bias.

- **Transferability** was facilitated by providing a thick description of the research context, allowing readers to judge applicability to other settings.

As the sole researcher, I remained reflexively aware of my role, maintaining neutrality during observations and engaging in ongoing self-reflection to reduce bias.

Data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. Three main themes emerged: (1) instructional benefits of EMI, (2) pedagogical strategies, and (3) implementation challenges. Interview and observation data were cross validated for consistency. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Rwanda. Participants gave informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and secure data storage. Fieldwork challenges, such as participant hesitation and the observer effect, were mitigated through transparent communication and discretion.

4. Findings & Discussion

This part presents findings from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations with lower primary Social and Religious Studies teachers in Mugano Sector. Data were thematically analyzed in line with the study's three research questions: teachers' perceived

benefits of using English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), the effectiveness of EMI-related pedagogical strategies, and the challenges faced during EMI implementation.

Teachers reported noticeable improvements in English skills. As Teacher H noted, *"Before, when we used to teach in Kinyarwanda, I felt that English was not coming to me naturally. But now, I feel like I have also opened and improved in speaking it."* Similarly, Teacher E observed, "*It has improved the children because... when you ask a child something in English, they respond in English."* Classroom observations confirmed basic English use, especially in P3. However, most progress was limited to BICS, with P1 and P2 learners often needing translation. As Teacher S cautioned, *"Sometimes the children repeat what you say, but you can tell they are just imitating without full understanding."* This suggests early gains risk fossilization if not supported toward deeper academic language development (CALP). Teacher qualifications played a role: trained language teachers showed greater confidence and less reliance on code-switching.

Teachers emphasized that starting EMI early builds learners' academic confidence over time. Teacher L explained, *"A child who started learning in English from a young age reaches fourth, fifth, or sixth grade with no more difficulties in English."* Teacher J added, *"When a student reaches the national exam stage... they must rely on their own understanding... When you see that students are passing, it shows good results."* P3 learners demonstrated comfort in using English, but younger pupils required additional support through visuals and gestures. Success varied depending on teachers' use of strategies like songs and role-play. However, learners without English exposure at home were more likely to struggle, highlighting the need for inclusive support mechanisms.

EMI also drove teachers to develop research and digital skills by accessing online resources due to limited printed materials. As Teacher C noted, "You gradually acquire skills to conduct research using the internet... like Google." Teacher D added, "*It makes me think about who [local leaders] are, what their roles are... both students and we gain a clear understanding of the topic."* While many used smartphones to explore content, this was often limited to translations or factual searches. Teachers without formal training lacked skills to assess online content reliability. Weak ICT infrastructure, limited access to laptops, and reliance on personal devices were additional barriers.

This section explores how teachers in Mugano Sector use pedagogical strategies repetition, code-switching, scaffolding, and translation to support learning through EMI. Drawing on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Cummins' BICS/CALP distinction, the analysis assesses how these methods affect comprehension, engagement, and English proficiency development.

Repetition was a common technique, particularly in P1 and P2, to reinforce vocabulary. Teacher K explained, *"If we are learning about family members, I tell them to write 'mother' and practice writing it… so that when they encounter it… they will quickly recognize and understand it."* Classroom observations showed teachers repeating words like "community" and "administration," with pupils responding in chorus. This supports Krashen's Input Hypothesis, emphasizing repeated, comprehensible input for language acquisition.

However, repetition sometimes led to the imitation of incorrect pronunciation, such as "nuclear family" or "hygiene," due to limited teacher proficiency. This highlights the need for pronunciation training to prevent reinforcing errors.

Code-switching between English and Kinyarwanda was frequently used to aid understanding. As Teacher K acknowledged, *"We are supposed to teach in English, but we teach in a mix… If you do not explain in Kinyarwanda, it will not make sense."*

In a P3 class on "Peace Education," for example, lessons were delivered first in English, then repeated in Kinyarwanda prompting more confident pupil participation. This aligns with Vygotsky's theory that the L1 can scaffold access to new concepts, and Cummins' view that strategic L1 use supports CALP.

Still, overuse of code-switching was observed in some classes, where English was limited to greetings. This undercuts EMI goals and indicates a need for clearer guidelines on strategic L1 use.

Scaffolding was limited, largely due to a lack of resources and teacher training. Teacher F shared, *"Social Studies often involves images or pictures… since these materials are not always available, using them becomes difficult."*

Observation confirmed minimal use of visuals or modeling. In one P3 class, a group activity was launched without English guidance, leading students to use only Kinyarwanda. A teacher also used a Kinyarwanda song to start a lesson missing an opportunity to reinforce English vocabulary.

Although some improvisation existed e.g., using maize sacks as chart paper—teachers lacked structured scaffolding methods like guided practice or gradual release, reinforcing the need for professional development in this area.

Translation into Kinyarwanda was the most widely used strategy. Teacher I noted, *"When translating into Kinyarwanda… it helps. Most of the time, you find they do not even understand [English]…"*

Translation occurred during instruction, assessments, and even on homework tasks. Teachers relied on it to make content accessible, especially in lower grades. However, students still struggled with comprehension, suggesting translation alone is insufficient for language development.

The approach aligns with socio-cultural theory as a support tool, but overuse limits language autonomy and inhibits progression to CALP. Limited bilingual resources further increase reliance on oral translation, which can burden classroom time and compromise test fairness.

Despite the efforts invested in using EMI, Social and Religious Studies teachers encounter various challenges in using EMI in lower primary schools. Interviews and classroom observations revealed several key issues, including limited English proficiency, inadequate training, insufficient teaching resources, lack of parental involvement, assessment difficulties, learner demotivation, and increased teacher workload.

Limited English proficiency poses significant challenges for both students and teachers in the EMI context. This issue affects classroom dynamics, as students often remain silent during lessons conducted in English. They become more engaged only when teachers provide explanations in their mother tongue, Kinyarwanda.

All teachers reported that lower primary learners, particularly those in P1 and P2, struggle to comprehend lessons delivered in English due to limited vocabulary. This necessitates the use of various teaching techniques, such as gestures and code-switching between English and Kinyarwanda. Teacher T highlighted:

"There are challenges because, first and foremost, the children do not fully understand the language. It requires using various teaching aids and different signs to help them understand what you're saying."

Teacher J added:

"Previously, we taught in Kinyarwanda, which made things easier for both the teachers and the students since we communicated in a language, we all understood. But now, this has become a challenge."

Classroom observations confirmed that when teachers asked questions in English, students often remained silent. However, when the same questions were posed in Kinyarwanda, students eagerly responded. This reliance on Kinyarwanda indicates that without adequate language preparation and transitional strategies, students may face delayed comprehension and poor academic performance.

This challenge aligns with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which emphasizes that children acquire knowledge through interaction with more knowledgeable individuals within a language they understand. When instruction is delivered in an unfamiliar language, cognitive load increases, limiting students' ability to engage actively in the learning process (Cummins, 2008). A study by Tadesse and Woldemariam (2022) in Ethiopian primary schools found similar challenges, where language difficulties led to low participation among younger learners.

In the context of English-Medium Instruction (EMI), nine teachers reported significant challenges stemming from their limited English proficiency, which directly hinders their ability to engage students effectively. Teacher H articulated this struggle, stating:

"There are times when I realize my own language proficiency is limited because I cannot claim to fully understand the language at my current level."

Building on this perspective, Teacher N further highlighted the linguistic difficulties teachers face, noting:

"What is unusual on the teachers' side when using English is that we also struggle to find many words in Kinyarwanda because we feel more comfortable continuing to use our native language, Kinyarwanda."

This limitation not only impacts teachers' confidence but also their capacity to convey complex concepts clearly. For example, during a Religious Education lesson on *sacraments*, a teacher hesitated when explaining the term *anointing of the sick*, struggling to find the appropriate English words. Instead, they switched to Kinyarwanda, saying, *"Ni isakaramentu ritangwa ku barwayi barembye,"* to ensure students understood. Similarly, in another observed lesson discussing *moral responsibility*, the teacher abandoned the English term altogether and relied entirely on Kinyarwanda to explain scenarios involving ethical choices.

Classroom observations revealed that such vocabulary gaps were common, particularly when abstract or culturally specific religious concepts were involved. These frequent switches to Kinyarwanda though helpful in the moment demonstrated that teachers often lacked the English proficiency needed to maintain consistent instruction in English. While this approach may facilitate immediate comprehension, it underscores the teachers' own language barriers and hinders students from developing the academic English necessary for progression.

The reliance on Kinyarwanda can create a cycle where both teachers and students become increasingly dependent on their mother tongue, limiting exposure to English and impeding language acquisition. This situation is compounded by the lack of professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their English proficiency and pedagogical skills in an EMI context.

Research supports the notion that teachers' language proficiency is crucial for effective teaching. For instance, Cummins' theories on language proficiency highlight the distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Teachers lacking CALP in English may struggle to convey complex academic content, further complicating students' learning processes.

Interviews with teachers revealed a strong and consistent concern regarding the lack of adequate training specific to teaching Social and Religious Studies, especially in the context of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). Many teachers expressed the need for targeted professional development that addresses both the content and pedagogy unique to this subject. Unlike technical subjects such as mathematics, Social and Religious Studies often require culturally sensitive approaches and strategies that foster values-based learning and learner engagement.

Teacher H emphasized the importance of training that not only fills resource gaps but also clarifies subject-specific teaching methods:

"*Training is essential, especially for those teaching Social and Religious Studies. For example, when it comes to cultural traditions, we lack resources. There should also be training to guide us on the specific methods to use... What are the unique approaches? What should be done to make the subject more understandable?*"

Echoing this, Teacher R highlighted the need to align instructional strategies with learners' language proficiency levels in lower primary:

"*If possible, a Social and Religious Studies teacher in lower primary should be given training... especially considering the language proficiency level of the children. This would provide the teacher with additional ideas to complement what they already know... in a way that the children can understand.*"

Classroom observations further supported these insights, showing limited use of age-appropriate and interactive strategies—such as songs, storytelling, and dramatization—which are effective tools for engaging young learners in Social and Religious Studies. This lack of strategy use is unsurprising given that only one out of nineteen interviewed teachers had received formal training in teaching this subject at a Teacher Training College.

These findings highlight a critical gap in teacher preparation and professional development, particularly in equipping teachers to meet the dual demands of pedagogy and language proficiency required for Social and Religious Studies under English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). Many teachers lack subject-specific training aligned with EMI expectations, leaving them ill-equipped to engage students or convey content effectively. This gap undermines learner comprehension and engagement, especially in conceptually demanding areas of the curriculum. Research underscores that adult learners, such as in-service teachers, benefit most from training tailored to their immediate professional challenges, a core principle of adult learning theory (Knowles, 1984). Studies also show that targeted EMI training significantly boosts teacher confidence and classroom performance (Uwitonze & Niyonsaba, 2022; Dearden, 2014). Without such support, particularly in non-core subjects, EMI implementation becomes uneven and ineffective across disciplines. Furthermore, a lack of pedagogical skills makes it difficult for teachers to identify learners' cognitive and emotional needs or design lessons that are developmentally appropriate (Berk, 2021; Shavkatovna, 2023).

The lack and insufficiency of appropriate teaching and learning materials were significant challenges highlighted by teachers in the research field. Most teachers pointed to the shortage of student textbooks as a primary issue, followed by a lack of audio-visual aids, which was mentioned by sixteen participants. They noted that only a few teaching materials could be created using local resources, while others require internet access, which is functional in only two of the five schools equipped with it. Teacher A stated:

"*The first challenge is when the subject is introduced as something entirely new to the child. You first have to explain to them what Social and Religious Studies is. After that, there's the issue of the limited number of textbooks and other teaching materials. For instance, they might tell you to play a video showing family members, but there are no resources available to do so.*"

Teacher E confirmed this reality:

"*For Social and Religious Studies to be taught effectively, adequate teaching materials are needed, such as proper maps. There are durable maps, unlike the ones we have to draw ourselves on large sheets of paper (Bristol board). Additionally, computers are needed since technology is now part of education, but we do not have them. Moreover, enough textbooks are also required.*"

Classroom visits revealed that children in lower primary schools, particularly in Social and Religious Studies, faced a remarkable scarcity of learning materials such as textbooks, geo-historical charts, and audio-visual tools. Some teachers resorted to creating their own teaching aids by drawing on bags that once contained maize flour. For example, Teacher D remarked:

"Listen! The books I have are very few, only five books for 88 students in a class. I cannot use them effectively, so I have to create teaching aids by drawing and showing the students. Alternatively, I take one book and move from desk to desk, showing the students and asking them to describe what they see."

This highlights a persistent challenge in providing essential instructional materials, which not only affects lesson delivery but also impedes the development of learners' English proficiency. Instructional materials are indispensable in Social and Religious Studies education.

One of the most pressing challenges identified by the majority of teachers (fourteen out of nineteen) was the limited parental involvement in children's learning, particularly in rural settings. This issue is primarily attributed to parents' limited English proficiency, which hinders their ability to assist with homework or reinforce classroom learning at home. As Teacher F noted:

"Yes, we also give homework to the children. However, many of them come to school without completing it because, in most cases, the children do not know the language, or sometimes even those who are supposed to help them, like their parents, do not understand the language."

Similarly, Teacher B emphasized that the language barrier not only affects students directly but is compounded by the lack of support at home, especially in subjects such as Social and Religious Studies.

This gap in home-based support affects students' motivation, reduces their ability to complete assignments independently, and weakens the reinforcement of academic content and English language skills. In response, some teachers have suggested the introduction of bilingual homework materials—written in both English and Kinyarwanda—as a strategy to involve parents more effectively. While this approach could foster inclusivity and bridge the communication gap between schools and homes, it presents significant implications in the context of Rwanda's language-in-education policy, which emphasizes the exclusive use of English as the medium of instruction from primary three onwards.

Implementing bilingual materials may indeed encourage parental participation and improve students' comprehension in the short term. However, it also risks undermining long-term English language acquisition by creating dependence on the first language (L1) instead of promoting immersion in the second language (L2), which is essential under EMI. This highlights a policy dilemma: while bilingual support can enhance immediate learning outcomes and parental engagement, it may counteract the goals of early English immersion and delay students' full adaptation to EMI environments.

These findings align with Epstein's (1995) theory of parental involvement, which asserts that academic success is more likely when schools actively engage families in their children's education—not only through financial support but also through academic reinforcement at home. Moreover, scholars such as Ball (2018), Uibu et al. (2022), and Uwitonze et al. (2022) have similarly reported that parents' limited English proficiency in multilingual settings contributes to diminished involvement in learning activities, ultimately impacting student outcomes.

Assessment remains a significant challenge in contexts where the language of instruction is not the students' mother tongue. In lower primary levels, many students struggle to comprehend test instructions and articulate responses effectively due to limited English proficiency. Teacher H explained:

"When we give tests or exams, since the children are very young and not all of them understand English, we present the question and then explain it to them in Kinyarwanda."

Similarly, Teacher F observed:

"Yes, we also give homework, but many of them come back to school without doing it because of the language difficulties."

These issues were consistently confirmed through classroom observations. For example, in a Primary One (P1) class, after test papers were distributed, it was noted that several pupils left their answer sheets blank, while a few others attempted to respond in Kinyarwanda. These responses indicated that the children either failed to understand the instructions or lacked the vocabulary to express themselves in English.

The classroom observations involved systematically moving around the classroom to monitor how learners interacted with test materials. This approach was chosen to gain direct insight into students' reactions and behaviors during assessments, such as hesitations, requests for clarification, and the nature of responses. Observing at close range allowed for a more accurate identification of language-related obstacles in real time and provided rich contextual evidence to supplement the interview data.

Moreover, it was observed that oral translation of test questions, while intended to aid understanding, often had limited long-term effectiveness. Many students appeared to forget the translated explanation moments after it was delivered, proceeding to guess answers or leave questions blank. This indicates that such translation, though well-meaning, does not fully address the comprehension barrier during formal assessments.

These findings are consistent with Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (1988), which posits that excessive demands on working memory—such as decoding unfamiliar language while solving academic problems—can overwhelm learners and impair performance. Similarly, Umutoni et al. (2022) found that lower primary students in Rwanda performed poorly on assessments conducted only in English, largely due to their limited proficiency. Nkosi and Pretorius (2020) echoed this in South Africa, noting that learners tested in a language they do not fully understand often perform below their actual academic potential.

The use of an unfamiliar language of instruction, particularly English, often leads to demotivation among younger learners. Teacher L noted:

"Unusual things happened when you started teaching in English. You noticed the children's behavior changed—they seemed disengaged, as if they were no longer interested."

The above unusual student behaviours were also repeated by Teacher P: "*Children struggle to write in English. When you use this language for an extended period, they start making noise, showing signs of boredom, and become difficult to manage them. This happens because they do not fully connect with the language, which affects their motivation.*"

In the observed Social and Religious Studies lessons, learners often remained unusually silent when teachers spoke English for a long period. Those seated at the back, as well as others struggling to understand English, were sometimes seen dozing off or becoming distracted, engaged them in unrelated activities. In other classes, teachers who noticed this lack of engagement often switched to Kinyarwanda to recapture students' attention. As a solution, experienced and creative teachers prefer introducing new lessons by presenting related pictures on the blackboard to mitigate these negative attitudes.

Teachers consistently reported that students' limited English proficiency significantly slows down lesson delivery, often leading to incomplete syllabus coverage. This challenge emerged as a recurring theme in both interviews and classroom observations. For instance, Teacher A noted:

"Due to the language, which the students are also not yet accustomed to, it requires us to spend a lot of time... If a lesson is supposed to take 40 minutes, it becomes necessary to allocate more time."

Teacher E echoed this concern, adding:

"*It is a very tiring task for us. The strategy we use is to repeat the lesson and teach it again from the beginning. This has consequence, as it sometimes causes delays in the syllabus, preventing its completion due to constantly revisiting and re-teaching the same lesson.*"

These insights illustrate how language barriers force teachers to slow down instruction, resulting in content being left uncovered by the end of the academic term. This was further confirmed during classroom observations. For example, in both Primary One (P1) and Primary Two (P2), teachers were frequently seen repeating complex vocabulary and concepts. They often invited students to the blackboard to practise writing key English words such as "family," "school," or "weather." While these strategies aimed to reinforce learning, repetition was often hindered by frequent spelling errors and confusion, indicating learners' struggle to grasp basic content through English as the medium of instruction.

The frequent need for translation, extended explanation, and repetition not only extends lesson time but also limits the ability to move forward with new content. As a result, essential learning objectives are not met, and learners are inadequately prepared for both internal assessments and national exams administered by the Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB) and the National Examination and School Inspection Authority (NESA). This is

particularly critical in early grades, where foundational literacy and content mastery are expected to be established.

From a pedagogical perspective, these challenges reflect a misalignment between curriculum expectations and learners' linguistic readiness. Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) explains that simultaneously learning content and a new language can overwhelm learners' working memory, thereby reducing the efficiency of instruction. Teachers also experience cognitive strain as they juggle between content delivery and continuous language scaffolding.

Several studies support these findings. Umutoni et al. (2022) in rural Rwandan schools, Kyeyune (2021) in Uganda, and Rajendra (2016) in South Asia observed that the reliance on oral translation due to language gaps often resulted in repeated lessons and delays in syllabus coverage, contributing to gaps in student achievement.

A notable challenge in implementing EMI is the lack of pedagogical skills among teachers. Most teachers (Sixteen teachers) reported that they had not received formal training in pedagogy, which significantly impacts their ability to manage classroom activities effectively. Teacher F stated:

"*The first issue is that we did not receive any training for this subject, at least to understand how we should teach it, nor did we inquire about how we could acquire better teaching materials, as we currently have none.*"

Teacher G agreed with the above interviewee on the same point in these terms: "*I believe training is really necessary. For instance, in my case, I teach Social and Religious Studies, but honestly, I never studied it myself and do not even know how it should be taught. My background is in languages. When teaching Social Studies, there are times I come across topics I do not know how to handle properly. For example, when it comes to religion, I have been told that it should not be prepared like other subjects, but I've never seen any specific guidelines for how it should be prepared...*"

This lack of training was evident during classroom observations, where teachers often failed to present lessons clearly or engage students effectively. The absence of pedagogical skills can negatively affect students' learning experiences and outcomes.

This challenge can be better understood through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which posits that learning is a socially mediated process, with teachers playing a critical role in scaffolding students' understanding. In EMI settings, teachers must provide appropriate scaffolding to help students bridge the gap between their first language (L1) and the targeted language (L2). For example, in Pakistan, teachers implementing EMI in primary schools faced challenges due to their limited knowledge of pedagogical strategies for language development. This deficiency affected their ability to create inclusive classroom environments, particularly for students with low English proficiency (Channa & Soomro, 2022). Likewise, a study conducted by Uwimpuhwe and Nkusi (2021) in Rwanda revealed that many teachers lacked the ability to integrate interactive teaching methods, such as group work and problem-solving activities, which are essential for fostering understanding in

an EMI context.

Another key challenge that emerged from the interviews is the inadequate preparation of lessons, particularly in the subject of Religious Studies. This difficulty stems primarily from teachers' limited familiarity with certain religious concepts and the lack of accessible reference materials. For example, Teacher I highlighted the complexity of preparing for Islamic Religion lessons, stating:

"*There are challenges, especially in Religious Studies... the language used in the textbooks for Islamic religion is unfamiliar.*"

In addition to unfamiliar content, limited access to teaching and research tools further constrains effective lesson planning. Teacher E emphasized the lack of basic instructional resources at their school:

"*At the school where I currently work, there is still a challenge of insufficient textbooks and a lack of computer to explore internet. For example, the Social and Religious Studies subject requires research using computer, but none is available.*"

Teacher G reinforced this concern, revealing uncertainty about the appropriate pedagogical approach for Religious Studies:

"*When teaching Social Studies, there are times I come across topics I do not know how to handle properly. For example, when it comes to religion, I've been told that it should not be prepared like other subjects, but I have never seen any specific guidelines for how it should be prepared. Training would support us and also help improve the students' learning outcomes.*"

Furthermore, classroom observations and brief documentation periods in the staffroom confirmed the lack of English-language references and subject-specific content, especially in Social and Religious Studies. While Christian texts such as the Bible are readily available in government-aided schools in Mugano Sector, equivalent resources for other religious traditions are often lacking.

These challenges clearly indicate the need for targeted support in resource allocation and professional development. Firstly, professional development initiatives should provide teachers with training on the diverse religious content embedded in the curriculum, regardless of their own religious background. Equally important, the Ministry of Education and educational partners should prioritize improving infrastructure particularly by ensuring internet access in schools which would enable teachers to conduct research and access teaching materials more effectively.

The issue of inadequate lesson preparation can be analyzed through the lens of Shulman's (1987) Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) framework, which stresses the need for teachers to possess both a deep understanding of subject content and the pedagogical skills required to deliver it effectively. In English Medium Instruction (EMI) settings, this challenge is magnified by the scarcity of content-specific resources in English, making lesson planning even more difficult.

These findings are consistent with broader empirical evidence. For instance, Uwizeyimana and Ndayambaje (2022) in Rwanda and Akinbode and Badejo (2020) in Nigeria reported that insufficient access to teaching materials including reference books and the internet impedes teachers' ability to prepare lessons thoroughly. Their studies further revealed that in the absence of adequate resources, teachers spend considerable time translating and simplifying content, which delays instruction and undermines the quality of classroom delivery. In sum, without sufficient support in terms of resources, training, and infrastructure, the teaching of Social and Religious Studies will likely continue to suffer from inconsistencies and reduced effectiveness, ultimately impacting students' understanding and engagement in the subject.

5. Conclusion & Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

This study explored Social and Religious Studies (SRS) teachers' perceptions of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in lower primary schools in Mugano Sector, Nyamagabe District. The findings addressed the three guiding research questions:

1. **What benefits does EMI bring to the teaching of SRS in lower primary schools?** EMI was found to expose learners to English at an early age, build confidence in using the language, and provide access to global educational resources. Teachers also highlighted its role in preparing learners for future academic pathways and in supporting national education policies promoting English proficiency.

2. **What challenges do teachers face in implementing EMI in SRS lessons?** Major challenges included low English proficiency among both teachers and pupils, heavy reliance on translation, insufficient training, limited instructional resources, and low parental support. Systemic issues such as overcrowded classrooms and teacher workload further undermined effective EMI implementation.

3. **What pedagogical strategies are employed to facilitate EMI in SRS lessons?** Teachers used translation, code-switching, scaffolding, repetition, and collaborative learning as adaptive strategies to bridge language gaps. While these methods supported comprehension, they often reduced sustained English immersion, reflecting a tension between policy expectations and classroom realities.

Taken together, the study shows that EMI holds potential to enhance language acquisition and global readiness in Rwandan primary education. However, without sufficient teacher capacity building, resource provision, and support systems, its implementation risks widening learning gaps rather than closing them.

5.2 Recommendations

For Policymakers

- **Strengthen EMI Training Programs**: Introduce continuous professional development focusing on English proficiency, subject-specific vocabulary for SRS, and child-centered EMI pedagogy.

- **Resource Provision**: Ensure schools are equipped with age-appropriate English learning materials, digital resources, and visual aids to reduce overreliance on translation.

- **Context-Sensitive Policy**: Develop flexible EMI policies that allow structured use of Kinyarwanda in early grades while progressively strengthening English exposure.

- **Parental and Community Engagement**: Launch awareness and literacy programs to involve parents in supporting English learning at home.

For School Leaders

- Provide mentorship and peer-learning platforms where teachers can share effective EMI practices.

- Allocate time for collaborative lesson planning and resource development.

- Monitor and support teachers' language use in classrooms, balancing policy goals with practical realities.

For Teachers

- Continue using scaffolding, visuals, and peer learning but gradually reduce unnecessary translation to increase exposure to English.

- Engage in self-directed language improvement through reading, online resources, and peer practice.

- Foster student confidence by encouraging risk-taking in English communication, even when responses are not grammatically perfect.

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